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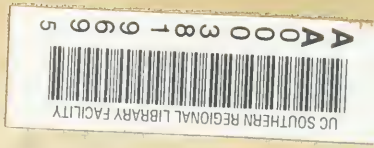

What is a Lady?

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To Mrs Dawson

With Mrs Barker's love

January 1st
1903.

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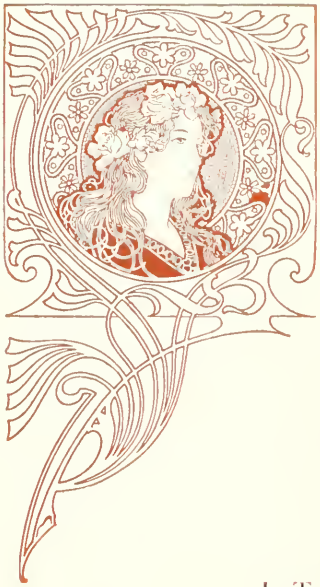
WHAT IS A LADY?

AFFECTIONATELY YOURS,

J. T. BARKER.

TO MY DAUGHTER, LOUIE,
WHO REQUESTS ME TO
ANSWER THE QUESTION,

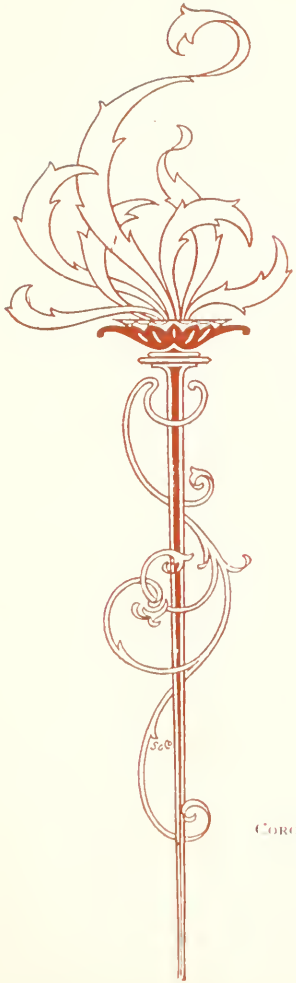


What is a Lady?

BY

J. T. BARKER, B.A.

London:
Printed by Geo. Joyner & Compy.,
27 High Street,
Peckham,
S.E.



A FOREWORD.

SOME friends who recognise familiar features in what I have written, and who fear that my true picture may be mistaken for a play of fancy, press me to assure my readers that my verses are not so much a poem, which means a creation, as a portrait, which is an imitation, roughly drawn indeed, yet because love guided the pencil, a vivid likeness, gathered from cherished memories of an idolized mother, sister and child.

J. T. B.

CORONATION YEAR,
1902.

942195

WHAT IS A LADY?

IN the question you ask, you propose me a task—
A task somewhat hard to achieve;
But much have I thought what wisdom has taught,
And now your suspense will relieve.

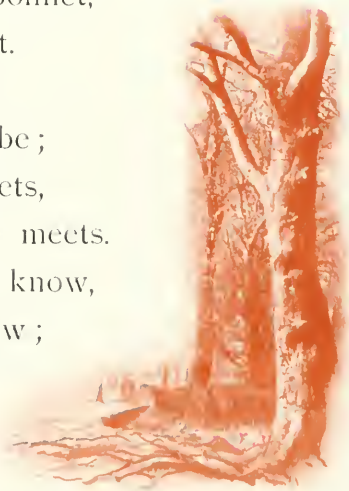
A lady—what is it? I hope not to miss it,
A correct definition to find;
The true signs to discern, the false glitter to spurn,
And the image engrave on my mind.

The word lady's to show, you should very well know,
That the owner's a giver of bread;
For philologists tell us, and they're knowing old fellows,
That lady from *Laf deg** is made.

And some have thought ladies so called from their dress,
And others on title and fashion lay stress;
And some urge the right of the title from sex,
The opinions are various enough to perplex.
A lady—a lady! what can she be?
What is a lady? Now let us see.

* Lady is from two Anglo-Saxon words, *hlaf*, bread, and *dige*, maid; hence bread-maid or giver of bread.

WHAT is a lady? "I can tell,"
Exclaims a well-bedizen'd belle—
"A lady is one whose ruling passion
Is to appear in each new fashion";
Nature's charms must be cover'd over
With puffs, and pads, and a dress-improver;
She must wear a high hat, or a tiny bonnet,
With a beetle, a bird, or a star upon it.
She must be a person of high degree,
Or at least make others think her to be;
She must walk sedately along the streets,
And turn up her nose at the poor she meets.
She must play the piano or harp, you know,
Not that she loves it, but only for show;
A trifle she'll smatter of languages too,
If only "Ich bin" and "parlez-vous";



On the humble she frowns, on the rich she smiles,
For money 'tis certain, all things reconciles;
A man may be pious, and noble, and good,
But if he be poor it is well understood
That Society blots from out of her books
The wretch who with favour on poverty looks.
So a lady abides by the social decree,
And will marry a man whatever he be,
A drunkard, a glutton, uncivil, unclean,
A gamester, or fraudulent, all that is mean,
If he only has money—he may be a fool,
The dictum is such of Society's rule.
No matter whatever she may be besides,
By social decrees a true lady abides;
They may cramp her mind, they may stifle her heart,
By these social decrees, she must still act her part.

Her fancy, her taste, her pleasure, her passion,
Must be all circumscribed by the prevalent fashion.
She is merry or wise, she is grave or gay,
According to what the world may say—
If she has a religion—and most would decide,
It is vulgar to be on the infidel side,
And whatever emotion the heart may feel,
To go to no Church is not genteel;
So religion she follows, and such as it is,
Its least observance she would not miss.
And her tythe of cummin, and anise, and mint,
She freely bestows without any stint.
Her repentance, and prayers, her reading and hearing,
Her joying and sorrowing, hoping and fearing,
Her pious deportment—each act and each look,
Are addressed by the rules of Society's book;

In all the relations of life she's the same,
She's "quite the lady" in nature and name,
Because never forgetting Society's claim;
As a sister, a daughter, a mother or wife,
Society's claims are the rules of her life—
In life, and in death, in body and soul,
She is made to submit to Society's rule.

IF this be a lady, then I would crave
To know how they differ—a lady and slave—
The one lifts his voice and demands to be free,
The other is subject to Mammon's decree;
The one chains may bind, but free is his soul:
Of the other, the world holds in bondage the whole.
Society may bluster, the world may decree,
But this poor soulless thing is no lady for me.

WHAT is a lady? Beautiful and fair;
Something of earth, but more of heaven;
In holy service, longing her life to share
With those to whom her heart is given.

Walking serenely on the lowly way,
That leads above;
Turning the night of earth to heavenly day,
By love.

More like a vision than some earthly grace,
And yet she lived;
And as each gentle lineament I trace,
Her picture is revived.

You think I dream of some ethereal thing,
Some fancied glory;
The portrait of a lady I will bring,
And tell her story.

I SAW her, in my dream, in infancy
A tiny baby, at her mother's knee;
A lady even then, she seemed to be.

A winsome prattler presently she grew;
Her ways and words were gentle, kindly, true,
No language coarse, nor manners rude she knew.

In play, from her, no loud or boisterous word,
No jest impure, nor scornful tone was heard;
Her laugh was like the singing of a bird.

Her service to her mother she would bring,
To sweep the room, to read, to play, to sing;
A lady was she then in everything.

At length to school, to teachers new she came;
Who never found in her a cause for blame,
Her quiet grace was everywhere the same.

'Mongst fresh associates, some false, some true,
Some friends she gained, some enmities she slew;
Doing to others as she'd have them do.

Home she returned, and brought to every face
Joy, for she was the sunshine of the place,
A gentle lady marked by every grace.

Her father's pride, her mother's ready aid,
Her sisters, gentle like herself she made,
Her brothers won by everything she said.

Considerate to servants, ready too,
To help in everything they had to do,
A lady she, from every point of view.

Her mother watched, and saw her growing bloom,
And almost sadly thought the time must come
When, of her treasure, one would rob her home.

Soon round the maiden came the neighbouring youth :
A magnet was she to them all in sooth,
Alluring by her gentleness and truth.

Yet she employed no arts to draw them to her,
To change the senseless boy to a fond wooer,
By sweet caprice, wounding to make hearts sore.

On rude familiarity she frowned,
Her lips were not the common meeting ground
Of boisterous kisses from the lads around.

Her glance sufficiently was a rebuke
To rising insolence in word or look,
A glance that the most daring would not brook.

And yet, think not the lady was a prude,
Her laugh was jubilant, but never rude;
Her gaiety contagious, but did not intrude

Into the regions of vulgarity;
She recognised a wide disparity
'Twixt sweet complaisance, and familiarity.

How the change came, I need not now relate,
How she became a wife—a maid of late,
Her character not changing with her state.

IN classical story, and scripture report,
The ladies appear in remarkable sort,
And yet if it be, as one cannot but see,
That goodness alone is true nobility,
Then I fear it will clearly occur to your mind,
It's more easy, a lady to picture than find.
But the lady I want you to think of just now,
Was one from the sole of her foot to her brow;
I cannot say much for her mode of attire,
Of colours to dazzle—of gems to admire;
Her grace was so perfect, I need to confess,

None ever could notice the style of her dress.
Her manners were plain, and owed nothing to art,
They seemed the spontaneous growth of the heart;
Her language correct, and not ungrammatical,
Her opinions expressed, and yet not dogmatical;
Her voice was low, and her tone was sweet,
Her beaming smile was with love replete;
Humour she had, and knew how to enjoy it,
And knew well the occasions on which to employ it;
From her lips and her looks there were never known
The scolding word, and the angry frown.
There needed no stroke from her gentle hand,
Her glance had all the force of command;
Her home was not rich, her condition was plain,
And yet she was never heard to complain;
Her life might be hard, but she never forgot

One wise and unerring had appointed her lot;
'Till her rest should come, and her crown should be won;
She was willing to do what had to be done.
She scorned no work that was right to do;
She only recoiled from the base and untrue:
In her home, and her heart, the thing called pride,
Found no room to enter, no place to abide;
Of honest toil she was not ashamed,
For she said naught but sin had right to be blamed.
In public and private, she was ever the same,
A true-hearted lady, wherever she came:
And with such distinction, I gladly accord
Her the title of lady at home or abroad.
Not a household drudge, not a slave at home,
At times she went forth, and her friends would come,
That the pleasures of social discourse be enjoyed,

And the mind upon more remote interests employed.
For 'tis found that the charm of a festive occasion
The better one fits for one's home occupation.
Fit topics for converse she always could find:
The faults and the follies of erring mankind
Were not the sweet themes which delighted her mind.
One might tell that she was, by her words and her looks,
An observer of Nature, a reader of books;
Her friendship, by such as were worthy, was prized,
Abroad she was valued, at home idolized;
Her husband, with thankfulness, saw in his wife
The joy, and the glory, and crown of his life;
Not beauty nor wealth, nor art could she boast,
But what in itself comprehended a host,
That grace which is written in Holy Word,
"A virtuous woman's a crown to her lord."

HER children believed her without limitation,
Of all that was perfect the sweet incarnation;
Their refuge in trouble, their solace in pain,
To whom application was never in vain,
A cut finger to heal, a hard word to explain;
A difficult task, they might never get through it,
And yet they all said, "They knew mother could do it!"
Her lessons were more from her life than her word,
And hence, as her little ones quickly inferred,
'Twas easier to learn what one saw, than one heard;
The rude jest she repressed, the kind word she approved,
Scornful language she checked, for she said "it behoved
"Little ladies and gentlemen always to be
"In love with the visage of sweet charity."
Untruths of all fashions this lady abhorred,
The conventional lie, or mere shadow of fraud;

And her honour was such that her children well knew
That a woman's no lady unless she be true;
And such were her teachings, she made them to see
That a true and real lady, whatever she be,—
Whether rich in abundance, or doomed to be poor,
Whether using her carriage, or sweeping the floor,
Accustom'd to hardship, and having to soil
Her fingers in dirty or menial toil,—
Is one by whom honour, religion, and truth,
Are prized beyond affluence, beauty or youth,
Who knows no pollution but what is in sin;
Who will not applause by appearances win,
Acknowledging nothing of shame or disgrace
In poorness of garb, or in plainness of face;
In rough ways of living, in hardness and toil,
That in this there is nothing disgraceful or vile;

That her outward condition whatever it be,
Whether high in position, or poor in degree,
In comparison seems to be naught to the fact
That she's gentle in spirit, and worthy in act,
That the right she maintains, and to truth she adheres,
Spite of menacing angers, or shadowy fears;
Her only concern, that her path should be trod
In allegiance to conscience, in duty to God.
Her life I've depicted, and thus you may see
That such is the lady I want you to be.

SHE lived and died; this noble, gracious woman,
And such as knew her felt that nothing human
Could be more fair:
For where the soul looks forth,
Shining with love, and goodness, honour, truth,
The outward circumstances one may find
Delude no longer the ingenuous mind;
The frivolous are moved by outward sense,
By silks and gems, by fashion and expense;
The wise will judge, not as the eye can see,
'Tis what one is, not what one seems to be.

THEN, as these gentle lineaments you view,
And, maiden! if ambitions dwell in you
To be a lady, hence may you aspire
To the high dignity which you desire,
If these great characters to you belong
Which form the subject of my humble song.

FINIS.

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